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Law of the Streak

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The Law of the Streak

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It's the bottom of the sixth inning in a seventh inning game. 2-1, we're trailing, a runner on second, I'm at the plate. The pitcher's a kid named Nathan Petty. He's bug-eyed with thick glasses. The kids call him "floater," a cruel nickname that has nothing to do with his fastball. Petty winds up awkwardly. He tosses the ball towards me. I contort my 10-year-old frame in the usual way—hitch with the left leg, pull the bat through. I blink, slowly. I never see the ball.

Ping.

Lightning. Thunder. The ending of The Natural. The earth scorched, the heavens ablaze. The ball launches into right field. The parents in the stands begin shouting. My coaches cheer so loudly that their voices trumpet above the crowd's: "Attaboy, Josh! Attaboy!" My teammates rush the field and mob me. Was I supposed to run to first base? What happened? They pile on me. I must have done something important. I didn't run.

* * *

The other day my father told my son that I was once a good baseball player. He brought my son my old mitt, a black-and-brown kid's glove that he had stored in his garage for years. My dad's idea is that my son, at seven years old, could now use this mitt.

And yet this mitt brings forth just one kind of memory for me. Searing pain. A glance at the glove reminds me of the many times that I caught flyballs in the palm of my hand. Whack. Sting. Pain to the bone. Pain in the palm of my hand.

My father, speaking to my son, fondly recalls my childhood athletic feats. "He was a great baseball player," my dad tells my son. I think, "he's talking about my last two years in Little League." Those weren't all that bad, even though my team won just three total games. I wonder, does he remember the early years, the first two years, the streak? Would he talk about that to my son?

My son's sporting interest is now basketball, thanks to my influence. He knows nothing about baseball, he hasn't seen a game, doesn't know the rules. So while he listens to my dad, he doesn't touch my old glove, doesn't really look at it, maybe can't comprehend it.

Two days later, the glove sits by itself on our floor in the dining room. It's become a piece of house debris. I think about picking it up. The only place for it seems to be the trash. My wife says, "Wasn't that nice? He could use a mitt."

Searing pain to the bone.

* * *

Little League is a fine American institution. I see the kids playing under the big lights on ESPN — Virginia vs. Tennessee, a girl pitching against boys, the all-black team from Chicago. It's the Little League World Series. I hear parents on TV talking about the sport, their successes, their kids' successes. A few people—some in movies—bemoan their failures, recall how pathetic they were.

Me, I was both terrible and good. This story is about the part where I was terrible.

At eight years old, I was drafted onto the Panda Vans Pirates, a team sponsored by a local van dealership. I was selected in the second round. There were two rounds. My father prepared for this moment, my selection, by religiously marching me to the school's batting cage two blocks from our house. Within that net, he sent ball after ball after ball towards me.

Sssuuu—the sound of the pitched ball tumbling through the air. Ping—the sound of my aluminum bat pasting the ball.

Sssuuu. Ping. Sssuuu. Ping.

Each ball went somewhere, how far, no one

could tell. But I hit most of them, the ones thrown over the plate.

On the Panda Vans Pirates that first year, I sat the bench, except when the coaches felt obliged to play everybody. They didn't have to—the team was second-best that year—but they did. The primary problem I faced was that I could not hit a pitch in a game. I might have succeeded in the batting cage, in practice, in my mind, as I daydreamed about Ryne Sandberg and Andre Dawson. My dad tried his best to help me, marching me out to the batting cage every day.

Sssuuu. Ping.

No problem, dad.

But at the plate in a game? Just sssuuu. A swing and a miss. Every time.

By the third game of my short career, I made a key psychological discovery, a real coming-of-age moment. I had developed a streak. The streak was this: I had no hits. Not just hits as hits, but no aluminum-bat contact with any pitch at all. No groundouts, pop-outs, bunts, foul balls. Not one of those nicks where the ball just grazes the bottom of the bat and hits home plate. Not even a foul tip into the catcher's glove. I would have loved one of those.

That year, I was 0-25, with no contact of any kind.

This, I think, was my first encounter with adult psychology. It may be the first time that I was self-aware. Not the kind of self-aware where you just know that you are. That kind doesn't really count; dogs, seals, dolphins, mammals seem to me to have this level of awareness. I mean a different kind.

This is the kind of awareness that tells you that you suck at something, and that you know you have been sucking at something for a long time, and that you will do nothing else but continue to suck at that something until you consciously stop thinking of sucking, which may or may not actually help.

This is a true self-awareness. It is the realization that sucking perpetuates itself, the kind of realization that separates us from other mammals. A seal might know the sensations of being alive—warmth, urges, nerves. But he doesn't have to deal with knowing his weaknesses. He can't swim well? The shark just swims up and bites down hard on him. The seal never thinks about his poor swimming ability. He just becomes lunch.

Me as an eight-year old? I knew the shark was circling, knew he would bite hard, I felt him bite, I knew he would do it again and again.

Eaten by a shark, 25 times. 0-25.

In the next-to-last game of that year, I started in right field, batting ninth, the only start I made. On the mound was Chad Van Kamp. He had the reddest hair possible and an abundance of freckles. And also the meanest fastball I will ever see. He was the best pitcher in our league. When he delivered the pitch, thanks to the hair and the freckles and the velocity of the ball, it looked to my eight-year-old eyes as if a trail of fire followed the ball's path.

Sssuuu. I swung and missed. Strike one.

At some point in our lives, we are legitimately scared to die. Something, an oncoming car, a naked live wire, a large snake, signals the Pleistocene instinct we inherit from our ancestors. Run. Run, it shouts. Every nerve receives that signal, while the mind thinks about its awareness of the signal.

Van Kamp wound up and threw. Sssuuu. I flinch hard. Strike two.

Chad Van Kamp could kill me if he wanted to. Chad Van Kamp is a predator. Chad Van Kamp could throw the ball at my knee, my nuts, my head. And I suck. I have a weapon that I don't know how to use and I suck. This is not my dad, this is no friendly batting cage. I cannot die here. Why are all of these people trying to kill me?

The catcher threw the ball back to Van Kamp. He started to step back on the mound. I dropped the bat. I ran. I ran off the field, past the batting cage and didn't stop for three blocks.

I ran home.

* * *

That should've ended my little league career. Anybody would have quit. But Greentown, Indiana, like all small-town worlds, endorses a severer reality than the shark-eats-seal world of red-toothed nature. Thanks to dad, relatives, the name-calling jerks in fourth-grade recess, I pressed on and played the next year for the Pirates.

In truth, year two looked promising. Players like Van Kamp had moved on to the next league, which was called "Babe Ruth." I also was one year older. I could hit all of my dad's pitches in the bat-

ting cage. And hey, the 1989 Cubs had made the playoffs.

The problem was that the good players on our team in my first year moved on to the next league, too. That meant more playing time for me. Instead of one or two at-bats a game, I might start in the outfield. I might get four or five at-bats a game. What is four at-bats times twelve games? A kid at any age can do that math. 0 for 25, plus four times twelve.

And indeed the streak continued. No hits, no foul tips. The lone highlight came in my second game that year, when I walked. It was the first time I felt the pleasurable sensation of standing on first base during a game.

There was some solace in that second year of Little League. Someone else shared my incompetence. The new coach that year was Marty Eagle, and it was a rule that coach's sons were placed on their father's teams. So Marty's boy Josh joined our team. He became, thanks to his dad, one of our starting pitchers. Not only was Josh a notorious mouth-breather who unconsciously slobbered on himself while talking about anything, a problem that led to some of the worst namecalling imaginable in high school—the namecalling is unmentionable, but it involved goats—Josh might also have spent the most time on the mound of any pitcher in the league. Maybe in any Little League.

Why? The unbeatable combo of being the coach's son and a pitcher with no control. Josh had an uncanny habit of finding the perfect groove, one in which he would miss the plate with every throw. Ball one, ball two, ball three—3-0 count to the first batter—and we knew he had the groove going. Once in it, he would walk four, five, six batters in a row. One time—and this is the truth—he walked twelve hitters in a row.

By the third walk in his streak, his dad, Marty, would start yelling a simple piece of advice after each pitch, "Rock 'n fire, Josh, rock 'n fire." Because of all the walks, we heard "rock'n fire, Josh" hundreds of times. An innocent observer might think that Marty was interested in geology, in something to do with the primordial earth, but he really just wanted his son to throw a strike. The "rock" in rock 'n fire meant relax and rear back. The "fire" part meant throw. It was as simple as that. If only Josh could translate that message into success. As a fielder, it was a dull wonder to watch Josh enter his groove. Ball one, ball two, ball after ball. In theory, any one could step up to the plate against Josh, without a bat, without talent. Rock 'n fire. Sssuuu. Ball four. Take your base.

Here's an outfield daydream of mine: why couldn't I be on the other team, hitting against Josh? No sharks, just smooth swimming.

But to his credit, Josh Eagle had other things going for him. He could swing and hit baseballs. I, as you know, could not. 0-25 stretched out to 0-40. 0-40 to 0-60. Remember, these are not simply hitless at-bats. These are at-bats with no foul balls, no contact with any baseball in any way.

Here is where memory eludes me. I cannot recall now or even remember why I persisted in this madness. Why did anyone let me continue to hit? Yes, I was fine in practice, in the batting cage. I could hit then and there. But now I remember sights and smells only—sssuuu, ping, the smack of the ball on the palm of my glove. I cannot recall anyone's motivations—my persistence, Marty Eagle's insistence, my dad's confidence. I am not sure how alive I was at nine years old, to put up with this streak, to hear the pestering remarks of the other team, to tolerate heckles in the school hallway.

Let's return to the beginning, the part where my dad brought my glove to me as a grown man. That glove is now my only material link with my Little League past. Should I throw it away—this piece of pain? Those times of failure that I now experience—two bad classes in a row, two moments within an hour where I treat my wife rudely—the streak begins anew. 0 for 2 can become 0 for 60. It's seems like a natural law. As a son of Adam, it's one I know.

Let's return again to the beginning. It's the bottom of the sixth inning in a seventh inning game. I'm at the plate. Nathan Petty tosses the ball. I close my eyes and swing.

Ping.

A dead shark in the water. The ball pops up high into right field. Everyone cheers—my coaches, my dad, Josh Eagle. They mob me.

It's just a routine pop-out. I am now 0 for 61. But this is the moment in the batting cage with my dad. I have finally made contact with the ball.